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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the difficulties encountered by student personnel services in fitting the nontraditional or older than average student into daytime college activities. The example of the Services for Returning Students at The University of Texas at Austin offers educational counseling services to persons who have experienced an interruption in their studies. In an effort to form a social group for such persons, student personnel workers successfully initiated and implemented the Students Older the Average (SOTA) program. The Union Program Office at the University provides the financial support while the Services for Returning Students promotes student contact. The operational concept in the approach is based on: (1) planning activities for an increasing subpopulation; (2) assisting these students in making the adjustment to the student role; and (3) promoting the transition for their split-level lifestyle as student, family member, and/or employee. (Author/VG)

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SOTA, STUDENTS OLDER THAN AVERAGE: A SOCIAL GROUP

The question we need to address today, and hopefully, find some answers to, is, "How can student personnel services fit the student older than average more easily into the daytime college scene?"

Along with the academic trepidations accompanying his/her reentry into formal education following an interruption in academic studies, the student who is older than average age views the university campus as a source of additional uncertainty. The lack of confidence exhibited by many nontraditional students (students older than average) is also identifiable in the area of social activities which are generally planned for the traditional (average) students and are not invitingly open to the older student. The older students have a split-level life-style, half of which is acted out as a student and the other half performed as an adult on another level with the responsibilities related to the world of work or family. These responsibilities more than likely remove the older students from the campus scene and from participation in many scheduled social activities. Other means to integrate this student socially are needed. Equally necessary for this special population, as well as for traditional students, are student personnel services which enhance intellectual growth and enrichment of the educational experience. But, these services are generally lacking on a daytime campus and in many evening programs as well.

The Population

The population with which we are concerned has increased in colleges and universities throughout the country. Current Population Reports (1974, p. 1) states "in 1947, the first year that full age details of college students became

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available . . . 18% of all college students were 25-34 years of age." The latest figure describing attendance of college students reports 22% of the 8.1 million college students in 1973 were students 24-34 years of age. (The Chronicle, 1974, p. 6). The Department of Labor estimated in 1973 that about 800,000 men and women 35 years old and older were attending college full- or part-time. Eighty percent of the older students in that group attended part-time. (New York Times, November 1976). Stanley Moses in his book The Learning Force stated the size of the adult learning society for all facets of learning has increased by 290% from 1960-1975.

History of SOTA

SOTA began in the fall of 1971 at The University of Texas at Austin. SRS, Services for Returning Students, which is located in the Dean of Students' Office, elicited the help of the Program Office of the Texas Student Union to bring to fruition an idea to assist older-than-average students in forming a social group on campus. Many returning students who had visited the SRS office had inquired about social activities for older students on the campus and had expressed displeasure with the apparent lack of concern for the nontraditional student, although these students represented 20% of the total enrollment of the University. A committee of three older students was selected to appear before the Program Board of the Union to request funds to plan activities for their subpopulation. They indicated to the Board that the request was a legitimate one since this population paid about 1/5 of all Union fees. To implement the students' wishes for programs and socials, a happy hour was planned for the first and third Fridays in the afternoon of every month. SOTA was organized to offer social contacts for the older student entering the University milieu and, in association with SOTA, the student would be able to discover a peer group with which he would be able to identify. Sandwich seminars with speakers of interest to the returning student were scheduled at noon seminars biweekly to offer the academic side of programming.

Members of the group are undergraduate and graduate students returning to the University or students who have continued in lockstep fashion through the educational process. The ages represented are on a continuum from 23-70 years. These students find their interest in activities differing from those of the typical 18-year-old freshman. The group at The University of Texas at Austin has remained a social group, electing not to become a registered student organization. This decision was reached because most of these students are engaged in the dual role of student and adult member of society and are unwilling or unable to assume leadership positions.

Programming

The scope of the programs for SOTA has been extensive in subject content. The sandwich seminars have featured programs such as "Packaging the Older Student for the Marketplace," "Test Anxiety--GRE Anxiety," "Financial Aid for Older Students," "Careers for Adults," and "Arteriosclerosis of the Campus." Attendance varies at these noon seminars between 25-50 at each meeting. Happy hours are held weekly now, with 30-70 people present.

The programming efforts have resulted from various surveys that have been conducted by SRS for the returning woman student, the veteran, and the returning male student. In each survey the questionnaire contained attitude statements about the major concerns that this subpopulation felt in returning to education. For the entering veteran student, the major concerns were:

A. Qualifications for veterans' benefits
B. Future careers
C. Spouse's support (for the married veteran)
D. Availability and knowledge of social services in Austin
E. Spouse's educational and psychological needs (for the married veteran)

For the returning male student, the concerns that were major were:

A. Budgeting money for education

B. Receiving veterans' benefits

C. Job following graduation

D. Living on a reduced income

E. Wife supporting me financially

F. Wife's educational and psychological needs

G. Wife's emotional support of the decision to return to school

H. Family's health

For the returning woman student, the concerns were:

A. Financial need

B. School expectations not confirmed

C. Study skills

D. Future employment

Spin-offs from the Group

Spin-offs from the group have been very positive and have provided the SRS office with a proactive approach to problems and concerns of this subpopulation. Some of these spin-offs have been a U.T. Day for Students Older Than Average, cosponsored with the Admissions Office. The U.T. Day has been held on a Saturday in the spring to invite prospective older students from the community to come to the University and in one location and in one day learn about admissions procedures, entrance exams, undergraduate and graduate requirements, financial aid, and services for older students that are available on the campus. Last year in the initial program, 78 people attended. This year 44 attended, and we hope with the use of a computer to follow up on how many of these people have actually enrolled at the University for summer or fall.

A divorced women's group has also been meeting to offer support and coping skills to one another. The group is composed of women who have attended SOTA functions and found value in talking over their current life-styles with one another.

Assertion training for students older than average has been another activity that seemed a natural for this group. Members of the SOTA group were contacted to see if they would like to participate, and one of the largest groups to assemble at the Counseling Center became the first group to be strictly an assertion-training group for students older than average.

Another support group which grew out of SOTA membership was a single-parent student group at University housing. The group provided orientation to incoming families moving into the student University apartments and offered help with connecting a washing machine, information about food co-ops, the shuttle bus, as well as providing group discussion on the single parent and child-rearing, and so forth.

As was stated before, SOTA provides a mechanism for discovering the needs of the group. From information learned at various SOTA functions, the SOTA Academic Rescue Squad has been developed to help students with math anxiety and foreign language skills. An orientation during registration each semester is held for incoming students with the members of the SOTA Steering Committee participating and offering survival hints. The students also help to identify supportive faculty members who will advise the older student without any prejudice for age.

Two other programs which have developed out of working with this group are Women-to-Women, where SOTA women were invited into the undergraduate women's dormitories to meet with those younger women and discuss the life cycle of the woman, i.e., why the older woman had returned to education and what kind of adjustments the return had necessitated in her life. The other program has been an annual career program as most returning students return for career goals.

Two exciting developments have been the initiation of other SOTA groups across the country--at Texas A & M University, Texas Tech, University of Arkansas, and this fall, the University of South Florida at Tampa joined the ranks. I just heard at this Conference that the University of North Dakota is planning a SOTA group. Also, the National Association of Women Deans, Administrators, and Counselors featured an entire journal called Students Older Than Average, using our social group's name to identify this population in their journal. This journal was the Fall 1975 issue, Volume 39, No. 1.

Projections for the future are to have more assertive-skills training for this population to help them deal with peers, faculty, and employers with that familiar question of "Why are you going to school, anyway?" And, we also hope to initiate a peer-advising program with the SOTA Steering Committee serving as the nucleus of the advisors. The Steering Committee are volunteers from the membership who plan the programs for each semester. There are six persons serving at present, including one married couple who are both students and had met at a SOTA function.

And so on Friday, January 21, 1972 at a local bistro near campus, the first SOTA happy hour bubbled forth. Over 50 students assembled, signed directory cards, and settled down for a happy time. Many of the single students, male and female, were timid in approaching the assembled group. The two sponsors literally took several by the hand and brought them into the circle of the tables. "This is Jim or Mary or Sue," as the case might have been, and the more outgoing would draw the shy ones in and make them feel welcomed. The group has continued to socialize at the now weekly happy hours, and many times these hours extend past 10:00 p.m. or to 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. with dutch-treat dinners, dancing, and/or bridge. Parties in private homes have followed, and now are a monthly social as a covered-dish supper where food is always gourmet and the group very stimulating.

SOTA has been a rewarding experience for these students and hopefully will continue to be for new returning students. Many students have stated that they wouldn't have lasted out the semester without the support and information gleaned through SOTA. The group has become a vehicle to integrate the student's former life-style with the present one he/she is living as a student. Students' spouses are encouraged to attend also. The spouses are able to perceive other students' behavior patterns and equate them with their own student spouses. The students get together and discuss with one another class schedules, management of time, support of professors, and so forth, providing that "underground grapevine" which the traditional students have always maintained in order to "survive" the system.

The shy female graduate student of 35 met a 40-year-old male undergraduate. The veteran of 25 met a freshman female of 23. The special student of post-retirement years settled herself between two second-career men and discussed her life as an army wife during World War II. They have found each other and realize that there are others on campus whose hair may be turning gray, whose long hair may be thinning and sparse, whose jeans are pressed, who wear foundations from necessity, who are timid, frightened, and lack confidence, but who belong to a group that is highly motivated, academically capable, and here to stay.

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SOTA, Students Older Than Than Average, A Social Group

Fitting the older than average student into daytime college activities is difficult. Student personnel services, dedicated to serving varied student populations, find their resources are primarily offered to the traditional student.

Student personnel workers can engage in new dimensions of proactive activities working with older students: planning activities for an increasing sub-population; assisting these students in making the adjustment to the student role; and promoting the transition for their split-level life style--student and family member and/or employee.

Services for Returning Students, located in the Dean of Students Office at The University of Texas at Austin, offers educational counseling services to persons who have experienced an interruption in their studies. SRS approached the Union Program Office to inquire of the possibility of the Union budgeting funds for activities planned for older students. SOTA, a social group, was accepted and implemented Fall, 1971. The Union has since provided budgetary support and SRS has provided student contact. A steering committee of six students plan the activities for each semester. These activities include bi-monthly sandwich seminars featuring topics of interest to returning students weekly Happy Hours, and covered dish suppers at members' homes.

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